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Thank God Obama favors the 'old' Mideast

By **Leon T. Hadar**
Commentary by
Friday, June 19, 2009

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In July 2006, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice travelled to Lebanon in an effort to bring an end to the war raging there between Israel and Hizbullah. At the time, she tried to market to reporters in Washington a somewhat odd spin on the violence taking place, not only in Lebanon but also in Iraq and Israel and Palestine. "What we're seeing here is, in a sense, the growing - the birth pangs of a new Middle East, and whatever we do, we have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the new Middle East, not going back to the old Middle East," Rice explained.

Indeed, the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda was challenging the status quo in the "old" Middle East by using US military and diplomatic power to promote democracy in Iraq (by ousting Saddam Hussein and holding free elections), in Lebanon (by forcing Syria to withdraw its troops and holding free elections), and in the Palestinian Authority (by pressing for elections), a process that would eventually produce political reforms in the rest of the Middle East, including Iran.

Ignoring the lessons of history, and dismissing warnings about the hurdles facing a campaign to implant Western-style democracy at gunpoint, the Bush administration inadvertently helped to give birth to a "new" Middle East in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, that was in some ways, less peaceful, less tolerant, and less democratic than the "old" one. And these efforts all had the effect of

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strengthening Iran.

The recent good news has been that President Barack Obama seemed to favor the more realistic US approach towards the Middle East that assumed the need for American diplomatic engagement with the existing regimes in the region. Focused on securing US interests, the Obama team has downplayed the importance of exporting American-style democracy. Notwithstanding the soaring rhetoric of his historic address in Cairo, Obama seems to be going back to the "old Middle East."

There is no doubt that Obama's rejection of neoconservative grand designs of fighting Islamo-fascism and remaking the Middle East, like his commitment to renew the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, has helped reduce anti-Americanism while empowering those players that favor stronger ties with the United States and the West.

From that perspective, the victory of the pro-Western coalition in Lebanon's parliamentary election, as well as the energizing of the reformist forces during the presidential election in Iran, could be attributed in part to the impact that Obama's message had on political groups calling for political change and openness to the world. Such individuals are now less concerned that they would be perceived as puppets of an anti-Muslim and militaristic United States.

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But Obama's Cairo address should not be seen as the launching pad for a new and gentler American campaign - using soft power this time - to democratize the Middle East.

To be sure, Washington and its allies should be relieved that the coalition led by Hizbullah, and backed by Iran, failed to emerge as the winner in Lebanon. But the outcome of the election there should not be misconstrued as a victory

for liberal democracy. The system of confessionalism that exists in the country helps to secure the power of recognized religious groups based on demographics. But the current arrangement is based on a distribution that reflects the results of the last official census taken in 1932. Claims that the winning coalition necessarily represents liberal values are undermined by the revelation that it received considerable financial support from Saudi Arabia, which, unlike Iran, doesn't permit women to vote in elections.

In fact, the elections in Lebanon and Iran (as well as earlier contests in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority) point to the fact that the drive for democracy - and, in particular, the push for elections - poses a threat to US interests in the Middle East. These elections have empowered social groups, including the working class and the rural poor, who tend to be more conservative, more religious, and more nationalistic in their political outlook and who don't necessarily share the more secular and liberal values of the West.

Watching the young and "cool" men and women in Tehran, demonstrating in support of the "reformer" Mir Hossein Mousavi (a member of the political establishment), many Westerners seemed to have adopted the wishful thinking that Iran is on a brink of a Western-oriented democratic revolution. The notion that the majority of Iranians may not be "like us" and don't share our dreams or aspirations was clearly very difficult to accept.

But any move on Washington's part to further isolate the ayatollahs in Tehran in order to force political change there would likely be as ineffective as the effort to punish the communists in Beijing in the aftermath of the Tiananmen protests of 1989. Instead, as in the case of China, US diplomatic and economic engagement with Iran could help create conditions more conducive for economic and political reforms, perhaps without the added pain of those birth pangs.

***Leon Hadar** is a research fellow in foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and the author of "Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East." This commentary was written for **THE DAILY STAR**.*

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